

The Clipper Visits Marie Heiblinger

BY JUDY FOLEY

Marie Heiblinger arrives at her Duxbury coffee shop every morning at 4:30, walking the half-mile from the So. Station St. home she shares with her son, Leo. At 2:30 every afternoon, she returns on foot, waving to passersby who spot the familiar figure on her daily trek. The routine is repeated 7 days a week, regardless of weather. During the Great



Marie Heiblinger

PEOPLE

Blizzard of '78, she arrived in a police cruiser. The rest of the east coast may have shut down, but Marie served breakfast.

Marie's coffee shop is an institution in Hall's Corner, and so is its proprietor. Austrian-born Marie has been serving breakfast and lunch to local patrons here for over 10 years. Inside the corner shop of the old Cushing building, she works behind the counters lined with faded red walls — dashing about the kitchen, filling dishes and cups, greeting most customers by name, her heavy German accent still dotted with broken English.

The shop is due to close when her lease expires next October. The brick building, its painted storefronts peeling, was recently sold to Tom O'Brien and David Chase of Chase Realty in Hingham, and plans have been made to renovate the entire structure. The realtors told Marie restaurant insurance is steep and her doors will close next year.

The news has disappointed local residents. "They threaten to show up at my house for breakfast." But she will not relocate. "I'm 67," she says casually, peering through thick glasses. "My son says I've worked for 50 years and that's long enough." She mentions a possible trip to Europe "to clear the mind," then shrugs. "All my life, I've been like a ball on the street. Somebody has kicked the ball here or there. Perhaps the ball will be kicked again."

She never asked for the events that shaped her life: war, revolution and political upheavals in Europe. "The only thing I ever asked for was a passport from Czechoslovakia to join my son in the U.S." She waited 16 years for that.

But first the story goes back to Vienna, where she was born in 1913. After World War I, her father, a native Czech, moved his family to Prague, when she was 7. She offers few details of her early life. Her mother died at 48. Her father, a mathematics professor, worked until he was 72 and remained active in his 90's. "I went to school, married, had a son and worked." The subject of her husband was dismissed with a wave. "They don't need to know about that."

She lived in Communist Prague until she emigrated to the U.S. in 1964. "I was never political. You did your job. You stayed silent. They didn't bother you." She worked for the state-owned auto dealership, Mototechna, for 19 years. "The state gave you your job. There was no choice. They decided where you were needed, and that's where you went." She leaned back. "Of course, there was no unemployment. And you never worried about losing your job. You were never fired, unless you made a serious offense, politically or criminally. Otherwise, you worked."

Later, as she talked about her shop's imminent closing, she spoke of her neighbor at the coffee shop, Frank Glidden, who runs the auto body shop next door. "He's 50 and has a family to support. He has no place to go. He's looking for a new shop. Everyday I asked him, 'Any luck?' Now I just look and he gestures, 'No.'"

Her thick accent became more indiscernible. "He

did his job well. Now he's lost it. This would never happen in Prague." She shrugged again. "I know this is the system in this country. It is a new owner, who has the right to do what he wants. But I have not been here long enough to understand it. For me, it doesn't matter. But for him there should be some consideration."

The security of working for the government in Prague proved unacceptable for her son, Leo, however. At 15, he fled Czechoslovakia to West Germany. "As a boy, Leo was smart and wanted to study. There, if you were not in the Community Party there was no chance to study. He knew this. He watched as a friend, who wanted to be an engineer, was given a job peeling furs."

Leo obtained a 2-month passport to visit relatives in West Germany, and never returned. The authorities questioned Marie and told her to call him back, "but they gave me no trouble." From West Germany, he arranged for sponsors to the U.S., and eventually came to study at MIT. He works as an engineer for a Swedish firm and travels frequently to Europe.

He married, settled in Duxbury, and had a daughter. "I sat in Prague, by myself, a miserable grandmother," Marie said. She applied for permission to leave Czechoslovakia but was denied. "During the cold war, nobody could come or go." She persisted, because at certain times authorities relaxed the regulations and if she was lucky, they would let her go. It was 16 years before she got lucky. In 1964, she was given permission to join Leo. She had to give up all her possessions, turning them over to the government in writing. She managed to bring one painting by Hurka, a European artist, and a collection of native crystals. "Everything else was left behind."

She landed in Duxbury, "a grandmother who couldn't tell bedtime stories because I spoke no English." She picked up the language by listening to TV and studying at home. A year later grandson Leo Jr. was born. "I was the happiest woman alive."

She lived with the family, but found herself getting in the way. "Too many in one kitchen," so she began to look for work. Her English was poor, she didn't drive a car (still doesn't) and everything was foreign to her. Finding work was not easy.

In 1969, she started working in the coffee shop, and a year later she owned it.

When she learned that Eugene Redlon was looking for help, she sent her daughter-in-law, Gloria, to talk to him. "Tell him I'm 54, I wear glasses and I speak little English," she said. Gloria came back with good news. He answered, "Tell her I'm 52 and wear glasses and send her in."

She was shy and afraid, not thinking she could handle the job. And it was difficult at times with the language barrier. When she first started, a man came into the shop and asked if she had iced tea. "Oh ya," she said, "we have nice tea." She had never heard of iced tea or coffee. "But the people were so patient and kind. Not in Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, did I find people so helpful."

The next year the shop was for sale. "There goes my job," she told her son. Leo negotiated with Redlon and bought the shop. "Then I became the owner," she said. "I run the business by myself and when I say something wrong, they can't correct me. We just laugh."

Marie has managed the coffee shop since. The cooking is done by her and Ellie Glass who "comes in faithfully every day like clockwork," she said. "Two lone women doing what we can." Leo Jr., now a student at DHS, who stands inches over his grandmother, helps out on weekends. Her granddaughter is studying ballet in Connecticut. She has watched them both grow to maturity.

For now, it's business-as-usual at the coffee shop as she waits for her lease to expire. The patrons who have been coming in for more than 10 years still stop at Marie's for breakfast, workers still make it the spot for their coffee break and lunch. Jack Horner, who's been coming in for 8 years, said Marie's friendly handling of all her customers has given her a special place among residents. "And she makes the best soft scrambled eggs I've found anywhere," he said over a lingering cup of coffee.

She characteristically leaves the future to fate. "Who knows? I never thought I would have come to this point. As a child, I never thought I would travel away from my parents' home, and here I am in America. No fortune teller ever told me I would run a coffee shop, or be making muffins and donuts and things I never heard of like eggs over easy."

It's easy to bet her next endeavor will be no less sedate. She shows no signs of slowing down or accepting retirement. She is, at 67, quick and full of life.

The ball is sure to bounce again.